



Community service proving a successful alternative

DAVISON

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DAVISON - If Kevin Carpenter ever gets in legal trouble again, he already has six hours of community service in the bank.

Carpenter completed 150 hours of community service at Davison's Pumpkin Fest and instead of leaving after he served his last two hours, he stuck around for an additional six hours to help.

"I had two hours to go on a Sunday at Pumpkin Fest," said Carpenter, 39, of Davison. "But I felt like I was cheating them, and so I stuck it out for the entire day."

Carpenter's sentence was a part of 16,281 hours completed in the program, started by Central District Judge John L. Conover, since March 2003.

The 16,281 hours served represent more than 2,035 eight-hour work days.

The uniqueness of this court community service program is its close supervision and use by the city of Davison, Conover said.

While other courts assign community service, Conover's is different because it is the only outcounty court that actually orchestrates and handles community service through the local city development office.

"It takes a lot more work and review hearings," Conover said.

It is also a more effective way of teaching young people a lesson, rather than just have a parent pay a fine.

"They work with veterans, community leaders and learn they can make a difference," Conover said. "It's really not all about the money."

At the time of his violation on driving on a suspended license, Carpenter, a married father of five, was unemployed and unable to pay the \$700 fine.

Although the program began as a way to hold young people responsible for crimes, Conover said that as the economy worsened, it expanded to include offenders down on their luck.

Working with the court and a list of local nonprofit organizations, Leigh Hider, Davison's community development administrative assistant, works out a schedule with the offenders.

QUICK TAKE

Community service
Central District
Judge John L.
Conover has run a
community service
program for some
offenders since
March 2003. By the
numbers:
16,281: Hours
completed, with
12,400 in the
Davison area and
3,880 in
surrounding
communities
446: People
completing hours
11: Still working
on hours
247: Individuals
who successfully
completed
121: Individuals
who partially
completed
83: Sent back to
judge for
nonparticipationC

While not all are happy about doing the work, Hider said some have found the work with the Humane Society, Goodwill, animal control and other nonprofits, if not enjoyable, at least rewarding.

Some of the nonprofits limit participation by not accepting offenders who have stolen or been abusive, but participants can always find places to work, Hider said.

"Some of them are really great," Hider said. "They are a really big help."

For those who fail to complete or show up at all, they are referred back to Conover, Hider said.

Conover said that participants often don't finish because of moves to college, and he works out alternate service for those in their new communities.

But all are required to finish their hours, he said. A volunteer himself, Conover said he sometimes runs into the people he sentenced when he is volunteering at the Davison Senior Center.

Each participant signs a list of rules that includes requirements for appropriate dress, conduct and responsibility.

"The kids that go through this court are pretty lucky," Hider said.

Davison uses them to help set up and tear down the Farmers Market and Pumpkin Fest, and help put up decorations for Christmas downtown, Hider said.

Community service participants are also sent to help elderly city residents with snow shoveling chores.

Other jobs Carpenter helped with were repainting parts of the playscape and painting the stair rail and ramp in front of the library and museum, as well as helping at the Woolley Festival and Pumpkin Fest.

"The program is excellent for people who cannot afford to pay these fines," Carpenter said. "I enjoyed the program. Every bit of it was enjoyable - the people I worked with, some of them I'm still in contact with them today."

Carpenter said he did more than half his hours with the Humane Society.

"I got along with all the employees, and it was a really great experience," Carpenter said.

He said he would likely continue to volunteer at some of the nonprofits.

Conover said the program is a benefit to the community and helps people caught in a

difficult economy.

"Some people are just at their wit's end, can't pay the money, so we can have them do the community service," Conover said. "And the work with the younger people can make a difference with them."

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